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THE CURRENT

Why is the Trump administration pushing to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to "The Current" from the Brookings Podcast Network. With us today is Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow with our Center for Middle East Policy and author of "Islamic Exceptionalism" and co-editor of "Rethinking Political Islam."

So, the White House announced Tuesday their intention to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organization. Shadi, what prompted this move?

HAMID: So, this whole thing first came up in early 2017 after Trump was elected. It was put on the backburner then, in part because the so-called "adults in the room" -- National Security Advisor McMaster, Secretary Mattis, Secretary of State Tillerson -- were not on board and had major concerns about how this would affect our broader Middle East policy. So, with that kind of resistance, the Trump administration kind of moved away from the idea. It's come back and it comes at an interesting time. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the Egyptian president, met with Trump recently and this was one of Sisi's asks, that Trump would get on board with designating the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. This is something that Egypt, as well as two of our close Gulf allies, UAE and Saudi Arabia, have been pushing Trump to do for quite some time. And Trump, apparently, told Sisi that he agreed with the basic idea and then this is where the process now seems to be moving. There's hurdles. It's difficult to actually do, but Trump does seem serious about it this time around.

PITA: Okay. What's the administration trying to achieve by doing this? What does that accomplish by declaring them a foreign terrorist organization?

HAMID: So, if this actually gets through, it will affect potentially millions of people. I mean millions of members and supporters of the Brotherhood in the Middle East and beyond. So, in this sense, usually when we talk about a designation, we're talking about extremist groups that have a very

small number of members or supporters, like al-Qaida or ISIS. This is something completely new, different, and unprecedented, where you're talking about millions of people now are basically going to be called terrorists by the U.S., the sensible leader of the free world. So, it's kind of like an odd and unusual thing. And we also have to think what that means about basically delegitimizing and criminalizing the activities of a very large number of people in a very important region of the world. I mean, that's really what we're talking about here.

It also, I think, will have serious effects on some of our allies as well, and the kind of interesting thing here is if you look at Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey -- I mean, the list is actually quite long -- Bahrain, Kuwait. These are all American allies that have Muslim Brotherhood branches or Brotherhood-inspired political parties in their parliaments, or even sometimes in government. So, it does bring up a lot of these kinds of issues. And what the Trump administration is basically doing here, in a broader sense, they're saying that all Islamism, all Islamists, are bad, and basically terrorists, and they're moving away from the previous approach of distinguishing between different kinds of Islamist groups and saying not all Islamists are the same -- which, I think, to many of us should be self-evident, but isn't in this particular case. And this is part of a broader civilizational narrative that the bigger problem in the Middle East is about this movement. It's about this ideology. It's not about terrorists, it's not about people who use violence. It's about a lot of people who have bad ideas and attempt to criminalize those ideas, basically.

PITA: That's very helpful, I think. What's some of this really crucial context you think people need to understand about the Brotherhood to really understand what's happening here?

HAMID: Well, one thing I think is always important to emphasize -- we can think that the Muslim Brotherhood is a bad organization, or that it has dangerous ideas, or that we, as Americans, should be very uncomfortable with their views on gender equality or minority rights, so on and so forth. All of that is completely legitimate. I think what's really important here, though, is to distinguish between saying the Brotherhood is bad and has bad ideas that we disagree with, and then saying they're a terrorist organization. These are two completely different things. And I think sometimes there's an assumption in kind of public conversation that if an organization is bad, then they're kind of in the terrorist camp, sort of anyway. I think that's really worth emphasizing here. So, in saying that designation is bad and that the Brotherhood shouldn't be considered a terrorist organization, we're not saying that anyone should like the Brotherhood or agree with their views, we're saying that the Brotherhood does not meet the legal criteria. And no one is really arguing, as far as I can see, that the Brotherhood, as an organization, has been actually implicated in terrorist attacks in X, Y, Z situations. No one's actually laying out a set of factual claims that this is why the Trump administration feels that now, as opposed to before, there is evidence to move in this direction.

And this is why I think it's sometimes hard for us when we're trying to argue on the basis of facts. That's not really what the administration is saying or arguing right now. That's not what they're doing, at least not yet. And at the end of the day, the facts simply don't support any kind of designation.

As I've said in other places, there isn't a single American expert on the Muslim Brotherhood who supports designation. And even some of the experts who are extremely critical, think the Brotherhood is bad, sinister, all of that, even they're not arguing for designation. So, there is a kind of unanimous position here when it comes to people who actually study this group.

PITA: Is there anything further on that point, about what sort of missing from the public coverage of this moment?

HAMID: This whole debate ties into a bigger conversation about what America's role in the Middle East should be. And the Trump administration, as we know, has really de-emphasized democracy promotion in the Middle East. And this is why normally, I would say one of the consequences of designation is that it basically is saying that Islamists don't have any place in the political process, even if they're peaceful, even if they participate in the democratic process, even if they renounce violence. That's basically the message being sent. And normally for an American, any American administration, Republican or Democratic, you wouldn't want to actually make an argument like that. You'd want to say, if people are willing to follow the rules of the game, then they should be able to participate, even if we don't actually act on that rhetoric. At least we, as Americans, we say things like that and we aspire to that.

With a Trump administration, it's a little bit different in that democracy has no place in the administration's overall strategy in the region. So, they don't actually seem to be worried one way or the other about making it harder for any kind of democratic participation to happen. So, that's a bigger issue with the Trump administration's approach and I think it's important to see this desire to criminalize the Brotherhood in that context of, like, hey we don't really care all that much about democracy or human rights and we're willing to be very deferential to particular allies: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, who have really been pushing this. And that fits into this very pro-Saudi approach that the Trump administration has had and the unwillingness of the Trump administration to put pressure on Saudi Arabia, or to even have any daylight with Saudi Arabia on key issues in the region. And we saw that, obviously, with the killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, where even there, there wasn't really any real interest to say to the Saudis, "this is unacceptable," and to put pressure on them, and to put pressure on their leadership. So, it's all in keeping with this broader approach of deference to the Saudis approach in the Middle East.

PITA: So, what's likely to happen next if this does go forward? Are we likely to see backlash from our other allies in the region?

HAMID: I think Turkey is one ally where this could lead to quite a lot of tension because Turkey is basically hosting exiled members of the Brotherhood from Egypt. So, people who left are fleeing Egypt when the repression was really ramping up after the 2013 military coup and Erdoğan has been a kind of vocal supporter of the Brotherhood in the sense of hosting some of them, but also supporting various Brotherhood groups in the region. And that's no surprise because Erdoğan himself is from the AK Parti, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, which people debate whether it's fair to call it an

Islamist party, but it's an Islamist-oriented party and I would argue that it shares the same school of thought as the Muslim Brotherhood. So, Erdoğan feels a kind of personal affinity to what the Brotherhood has been going through and the repression they faced. So, I think that's going to be a flash point.

And then, depending on how the actual legal process works, if it goes forward, it'll probably be held up in courts and it can be challenged in that sense. And that can be a more factual process of actually seeing if the Brotherhood meets the legal criteria. And also, there is pushback within the U.S. administration itself from career diplomats and officials, especially in the State Department, in the Defense Department, who know that this isn't going to be great for a variety of our relationships.

So, I think that we're going to have to wait and see how far the Trump administration is able to push this, how much resistance there is. And I'm pretty sure that it's going to be difficult. But in this kind of political environment, with this administration, all bets are off. And we'll have to wait and see are they willing to push really hard to actually get this through, even if there is considerable resistance internally.

PITA: Great. Thanks a lot, Shadi.

HAMID: Thanks for having me.